

NATURE - MY THIN PLACES

“I’ve stood in some mighty mouthed hollow
That’s plumb-full of hush to the brim;

I’ve watched the big, husky sun wallow
In crimson and gold and grow dim;

Till the moon set the pearly peaks gleaming,
And the stars tumble out neck and frock;

And I’ve thought that I surely was dreaming,
With a piece of the world piled on top.

That stanza has penetrated my psyche for over 70 years. Some of you may recognize it. It is from the Spell of the Yukon by Robert Service.

Service was born in England of Scottish descent in 1874 and died in 1958. He was a British-Canadian poet and writer, often called "The Bard of the Yukon". He started out as bank clerk, but when his bank sent him to the Yukon he became enamored by the accounts of the gold rush.

As a young man, I first came upon his verses while gathered around campfires listening to a former mentor recite "The Shooting of Dan McGrew" and later "The Cremation of Sam McGee." Later I found the book The Complete Works of Robert W. Service that someone had either purloined or purchased from the purged collection of the North Cincinnati Branch of the Public Library. That began my continuing reflection and quest for those places that have touched deep inside of me and never fail to provide a sense of awe, a spiritual resonance that renews and shapes my being.

Several years past a group from Christ Church Cathedral, a few blocks down the street from the Literary Club, went on a pilgrimage to Scotland and the Iona Isle. Iona was a center for monastic life for several centuries and because of its natural beauty and tranquility has become a favored site for spiritual pilgrimages. It is there where Celtic tradition holds that Heaven and Earth are separated by the narrowest margins of time and space, where one might get a glimpse of heaven and the transcendent places beyond the limits of all experience and knowledge. When the group returned, the artists among them mounted a display of their artistry in words, sketches, paintings and photographic images. The exhibit was entitled "Thin Places."

If you consult the Google Oracle, you will find many references to "Thin Places", including catalogs of places that are held in great reverence by a wide range of faiths. Many of the places represent an homage to the architecture and history of the sacred.

So, what are my *Thin Places*? Where do I feel spiritual? Where do I get that feeling of glimpsing the eternal? Where do I have that over whelming sense of awe? Harkening back to Service, places where I felt most spiritual were not in some ancient man-made ruin or soaring cathedral but in some “mighty mouth canyon,” on a mountain pass, deep in a forest or on a lake so large that the islands seem to float in the sky.

What Is Awe

What does it mean to feel awe or wonder or even transcendence? Although awe has been explored and debated by philosophers and religious scholars for ages, it was not until recently that researchers have turned their attention to the phenomena. Awe is a many faceted emotion that is experienced in a very subjective and personal way. Awe experiences are what psychologists call self-transcendent.

Abraham Maslow originated a more secular study of the emotion in the early 60s using the term, “peak experiences” to describe moments of extraordinary experience. He identified characteristic sensations, such as disorientation of time and space, a loss of fear and anxiety, and such emotions as wonder, awe, reverence, humility, surrender, and even worship, before the greatness of the experience. Emotions that resonate with some of my experience.

Most recently psychologists Scott Barry Kaufman and David Yaden defined the ingredients of awe by surveying people about their experiences and comparing those elements to ones that had already been identified in the research. In his paper, “Can You Quantify Awe?” in the Scientific American, October 17, 2018, Kaufman cited six “facets” that characterize the experiences that elicit awe and wonder.

Perception of vastness: This can either refer to physical vastness, or perceptual vastness, like the age of the universe.

Need for accommodation: This is the feeling that you just can't process it or take it all in — it's too much for your eyes to fully appreciate or for your brain to handle.

Alterations in time: This is the sensation that time is slowing, expanding, or standing still, like you could sit in this moment forever.

Self-diminishment: It makes you feel smaller, both physically and metaphorically. You feel as though your own concerns and desires don't mean as much in the presence of this much greatness.

Connectedness: This is the feeling that everything is one, like you're connected to the world and to every person in it.

Physical sensations: Many people freeze in place, get goosebumps and chills, or just stare with their jaws agape.

Do these facets resonate with some of your experiences?

Have you ever been in a place where you feel nothing but wonder? I would like to describe some of the moments in my life that created in me a feeling of awe or transcendence.

Wonderous Awe of the Northwoods

As a young man I spent many summers at Camp Kooch-I-Ching on the border of the US and Canada, plying the lakes and rivers of the Boundary Waters, the Quetico, and places more northerly by canoe. Those trips inspired a reverence and awe of the natural world. When out in the wilderness there is often a quiet and calm between action, hardship and peril. These are times that one pays attention to the beautiful vast country through which you hike or paddle.

To quote Sigrid Olson in his book The Singing Wilderness ,“This is the time for silence, for being in pace with ancient rhythms and timelessness, the breathing of the lake, the slow growth of living things. Here the cosmos could be felt and the true meaning of attunement.”

We would often break camp at first light to take advantage of the calm waters. We would see the sun gradually escape from the waters of the lake as it began its journey across the heavens. Sometimes, like an artist, the sun would paint the clouds with brilliant colors until it was well up from the horizon. A new day and new beginnings!

In the evening we would often be treated with a display of golden trees on the eastern shoreline where the sun, on its journey to places more westerly, left behind a scene for our wonderment. Far from other illumination, before the moon-man showed his face, the sky was so black that even the faintest stars of the Milky Way had no trouble showing their beauty. And sometimes, the moon became another player on the stage, one that would not be denied and added to the grandeur of the moment. To top it all off, on a clear dark night, those responding to the call of nature might be treated to yellow, purple and green of the Northern Lights as they shimmer and dance across the heavens.

Quests in the Far West

In the early 80's, my two older boys and a friend of theirs conspired to take me on a backpacking trip in the Sierra Mountains, a place they had grown to love when they needed an escape from their doctoral studies at the University of California San Diego. They wanted to share their love of that wilderness with the old man before it was too late. They probably also thought that it was time that I had an out-of-the-canoe experience. They hired some wranglers with horses and pack animals to get us up to the high country as mercilessly as possible. The first night

we shared a couple of bottles of excellent California Pinot Noir and steaks to celebrate the beginning of our seven days in the mountains. It also helped to overcome the pain in my butt and inner thighs from hours on horseback. Needless to say, the wine and steak was a one night stand, but there were many adventures and transcendent experiences ahead to be savored.

I was in awe of the different colored mountain peaks that were revealed when we arrived at the top of a high pass, the ranks upon ranks of peaks that spread before us. It made me feel so very small in such a vast expanse of nature. My memories of that trip in the Sierras embraces the evenings when the sun would paint the far mountain sides with a pallet of yellows mediated by the rock upon which it strikes. In the evening, sipping coffee by the fire light, there was a calm and almost meditative end to the day.

In my experience, the stillness, the pungent aroma of the accumulated duff walking the trails in the redwoods leaves me awed by the majesty of these ancient and old giants of our living world. The scent of their needles and the grandeur beckons me to take my time, to appreciate these miracles of creation. There is a special bond created among those who travel together through wilderness, facing the challenges, and experiencing the wonders that nature has to offer.

How Does Nature and Wonderment Affect Well-being?

It is accepted that activity in the out-of-doors results in increased fitness. Some people believe that just being there increases well-being. Forest bathing, which became popular in Japan in the 80s, is becoming a centerpiece of preventive health care in other Asian cultures. Hanna Fries, in her delightful little book Forest Bathing Retreat quotes Robert Lois Stevenson, “It is not so much for its beauty that the forest makes a claim upon men’s hearts, as for that subtle something, that emanates from old trees, that so wonderfully changes and renews a weary spirit.”

Some scientific researchers are just now focusing on the biological effects of awe. There is some research to suggest that antibacterial compounds released by trees could have a positive effect on health. In preliminary studies there is an indication that dispositional awe is related to the reduction of the cell signaling protein that helps us fight infection and trauma but in the long term can sometimes lead to feelings of depression.

Meta-research emanating from England looked at over 140 studies involving 290 million people in 20 major countries including the US. They analyzed the results in terms of those with the highest amount of exposure to green spaces with those with the least amount of exposure. Green space was defined as urban parks, lawns, trees, and open undeveloped land with natural vegetation. Living closer to nature appeared to be related to lower blood pressure, lower heart rate and stress.

Psychological research indicates that awe may focus our attention on the present time and place. It may also cause us to shift our concern about self to being part of something greater and to relationships with others and the environment. In the April 2015 journal of the Association for Psychological Research, Anna Mikulak concludes in “All About Awe”, “So perhaps the million-dollar question is this: Can we design interventions that harness and promote the pro-social and health-related consequences of awe?”

It is interesting that studies and research related to awe and its positive effect on the individual, more often than not, talk about experiences related to nature and the environment. In this age of entrapment by technology and the deleterious effects of this tethering, perhaps the mediating effect of a walk or hike in park or woods, a canoe trip on our lakes and streams, or a wilderness adventure is one answer.

Attitudes Toward Nature

It is easy to understand why myths about creation and nature had a strong hold on indigenous peoples. Myths and legends were created to describe the phenomena they experienced and man’s relation to it. The Shaman or Medicine Man was the spiritual leader, the carrier of these myths and a healer with the wisdom of the natural world. Eric Weiner in his book Man Seeks God suggests that Shamanism is the world’s first religion and many religions to this day have trace elements of the rituals. He also states, “Shamanism, not prostitution, is the oldest profession. For thousands of years, it was the Shaman who was the guardian of the mythology. They were lovers of nature and relate to the natural world as equals, as the family of mankind.”

Native Americans have always had a different take on nature from that which calls for exploitation for financial gain and power inherited from European cultures. Their wisdom and tradition does not separate the person from the land he inhabits. They see the person and all of creation to be one, to be honored and to be cherished.

Paula Gunn Allen, a Native American poet, novelist, and scholar from the Laguna Pueblo phrased it this way

We are the land...that is the fundamental idea embedded in Native American life...the Earth is the mind of the people as we are the mind of the earth. The land is not really the place (separate from ourselves) where we act out the drama of our isolate destinies. It is not a means of survival, a setting for our affairs... It is rather a part of our being, dynamic, significant, real. It is our self.

Dr. Bradley Hauff, an Oglala Sioux and Missioner for Indigenous Ministries of The Episcopal Church, explained it this way, "Indigenous people have a relationship with the land that is sacred and central to our way of life. Our culture, spirituality, identity, survival, and understanding of life is centered in the Earth and the Cosmos. If the land is desecrated, so are we."

Meditations in the Southwest

In recent years, I have spent significant time in Navajoland working with friends on the reservation trying to develop a sustainable future for the Episcopal congregations through generosity, industry, and employment. On one of my earlier trips we went to Canyon de Chelly in Northeastern Arizona, a place inhabited by indigenous peoples for over 5,000 years. To look down into the colorful sandstone canyon and see the meandering blue river and ribbons of green that ran alongside was truly an awe inspiring moment. While not as large as the Grand Canyon, its beauty is unrivaled. As we hiked along the rim, we came to a place where we could descend to an overlook. There we took time to breathe deeply the air and savor the incense of the surrounding pinion pine, sage and creosote bush.

Our Navajo leader, an ordained priest, deeply steeped in the spirituality of the Navajo people, told stories of the past and present life in the canyon and the challenges for those who live there under very primitive conditions. She then passed a small leather pouch and asked each one of us to take a pinch of corn pollen, one of the sacred herbs of the Navajo people. We held it while she offered a prayer to the Great Spirit and Mother Earth for the continued preservation of this sacred site. She then spread the pollen into the updraft of air from the Canyon. We were then asked to offer our prayers as we spread our pollen in the wind. For me, it was a very awe inspiring and spiritual moment in one of nature's most beautiful places.

Navajo Blessing Ceremony

On another trip I was involved in a Navajo Healing and Blessing Ceremony at a Sheep Camp belonging to a friend. When the group of fifteen Navajo elders and a few of us Bilagaanas (white people) arrived, preparations were already underway for the ceremony. The Navajo Medicine Man and his assistant were preparing the hogan and the area with healing water. They sprinkled the water on the structures, the sheep in the corrals and even the vehicles that had brought us to the camp. A fire had been built outside of the hogan with cedar to create a bed of coals to be used in the ceremony.

After a small repast, the group filed into the hogan about 7:00 in the evening. The hogan was octagonal in shape with a dirt floor and a small wood stove in the center. The door of the hogan was propped open and a blanket was hung over the doorway to allow for ease of access and for the prayers to ascend to the heavens. It also made for a hot and humid enclosure.

The Medicine Man chanted and began carefully arranging his sacred materials from nature in front of him to create a small altar. A small Navajo blanket was spread on the ground and a basket with stones from the four sacred mountains was placed in the center. He carefully arranged several crystals and animal fetishes on the blanket and then added an eagle bone whistle and fans of eagle and hawk wings. Then the assistant brought in a shovel of coals from the outside fire and created a small mound of coals close to the Medicine Man. Water and local herbs from a finely beaded pouch were sprinkled on the coals periodically throughout the evening to carry the prayers and meditations into the heavens. Much of the healing and blessing ceremony was conducted in Navajo with some comments and questions of the group spoken in English. The ceremony lasted over three hours.

Early in the ceremony the Medicine Man began with a prayer and incantations and prepared for a tobacco ceremony by encasing tobacco in a dried cornhusk. He lit the tobacco with coals from the fire and as he smoked the tobacco he blew smoke in the four directions of the sacred mountains and then bathed his body in the vapor. The tobacco was passed around the circle with each person following the Medicine Man's lead.

A singing chant was started in Navajo and the elders present joined in. There were many repeated phrases following chanted entreaties by the Medicine Man. Throughout this chant the coals were refreshed from the cedar fire outside the hogan and herbs and water were repeatedly cast upon the embers.

A pot of fresh cold water was brought in by the assistant and blessed by the Medicine Man by fanning with a feathered wand and blowing an eagle bone whistle several times over it. The whistle was very shrill and loud in the close environs of the hogan. The pail and tin cup were passed around for everyone to drink to refresh themselves with the water that, at that point, was considered sacred and precious.

The Medicine Man then began a long dissertation in Navajo. During this time, he continued to spread herbs from his pouch and water onto the coals and handled a number of the materials that he had gathered around him. This seemed like a period for meditation and reflection that went on for some time. Following this experience another pail of water was brought in and blessed with incantations and the eagle bone whistle. The Medicine man then dipped the eagle wing fan in the water and with a prayer, placed the fan on the head of the person on his left, then on the outstretched hands and finally shaken over the person's body. This ritual was repeated for each of us as he moved clockwise around the circle. After I was sprayed with the shockingly cold water from the eagle wing fan, the elderly Navajo woman seated next to me leaned over and said, "Well John, do you feel like a Navajo yet."

The ceremonial activity ended with more blessings and the instruction to leave the hogan: “stretch arms to the heavens, take a deep breath and offer your own prayers for the success of your mission.” Night had fallen on the mesa and the stars shown brilliantly even though the moon was also bright in the sky. The air was cool, crisp and refreshing after several hours in the hot and humid hogan. The release and the awe I felt at the end of the ceremony will forever be associated with this moving spiritual experience. The Healing and Blessing Ceremony was a fitting prelude to the meetings, which would take place the next day with the Navajo elders

Art And Nature

Many artists know those moments where wonder and awe interrupt the noise of daily life and great artists know how to capture them.

Generations of painters, photographers, writers, poets and musicians have shared their observations and deep feelings for the mountain, wood, desert, sea and prairie landscapes they experience.

Painters and Nature

Painters like Vincent van Gogh can see and feel the energy of nature and that's what they paint. He is quoted as saying, “If you truly loved nature you would find beauty everywhere.” The heroic art influenced by the *Hudson River School of Painters* leaves one feeling wonder and awe. Albert Bierstadt was a German-American painter best known for his lavish, sweeping landscapes of the American West. One of the most inspiring exhibits I ever witnessed was that of Fredrick Church's work at the National Gallery in Washington, DC. The size of the canvases, the depth of the scenes and the wonderful attention to color and light left me breathless.

Photographers and Nature

Ansel Adams, well known photographer and environmentalist, captured the grandeur and imagination of the American West in his black-and-white images. Jim Brandenburg, a well-known National Geographic photographer and environmentalist, has captured the beauty and color of nature and the creatures that inhabit the land. If you ever get to Ely, Minnesota, stop in The Brandenburg Gallery and witness the amazing photography and videos captured by him. They will “blow you away”.

Writers and Nature

We have been turning to nature for solace and healing for ages and artists have been putting words to that connection. Nature has been a recurring theme in poetry. I have already mentioned my preference for the rawness of the works of Service. However, the nature inspired works of Wordsworth, Thoreau, Emerson, Muir, Sandberg, Oliver, and many others have had a great effect on our nation's psyche. They have inspired and influenced presidents and legislators at all levels to preserve natural treasures for all to experience and enjoy. Unfortunately, there is now a full scale attack on this heritage.

Music and Nature

Music has included nature themes for centuries. Some of the classical composers inspired by nature include De Bussey, Brahms, Wagner, and Vivaldi. In the last several decades, popular music has included environmental concerns for the sustainability of natural resources in instrumentals and lyrics. Seeger, Mitchell, Taylor, and Browne are names that I recognize. However, there is a whole new generation of singer-song writers whose music and genres, foreign to me, are a call to activism against the exploitation of natural resources and climate change.

I have emphasized artists, but many people react with wonder and awe at personal accomplishments as they experience and discover new meanings, encounter “aha” moments and achieve new break throughs in their own fields of endeavor.

Other Thin Places in Nature

It may sound like I associate distance traveled to exotic places as indicative of the wisdom I have accrued about thin places. While I have chosen to cite distant environments, there are other moments that have caused me to feel the same sense of wonder right here at home.

- Viewing the Ohio river valley from one of the many overlooks in our parks.
- Experiencing a sense of escape canoeing down the scenic Miami river.
- Walking a less traveled trail in one of our city or county parks.
- Witnessing the beauty of the changing colors of fall foliage.
- Walking in the woods after a deep snow and experiencing the stillness and pure white carpet. All you hear is the crunch of snow under your boots.

While they may not be as awesome as some more distant escapes, they always have a calming effect and provide distance from my other cares.

In this paper, I have shared a few of the *Thin Places* where I have experienced the beauty of nature that created a reverence and spirituality that centers me. There is a special bond created among those who travel together through wilderness, facing the challenges, and experiencing the wonders that nature has to offer.

Our planet looks so magnificent in the images from space. It is the only home that we, our children and generations to follow will ever know. My plea is for all of us to understand that we often fail to take precautions against the concerns for our environment because we tend to give greater weight to present costs and benefits than to future risks and opportunities.

In closing, I would like to quote Bishop Steven Charleston, a Native American of Choctaw heritage and a former Bishop of Alaska. For three years he recorded his early morning meditations on Facebook and later captured them in books that have inspired many around the globe. In his book, [Hope As Old As Fire](#), he provides us with a guidance for our continued journey on this planet.

“At prayer this morning, beneath the clear night sky, I saw a shooting star, as bright as though it were drawn by the hand of a playful God. A sign of the heavens. A message of presence. I know enough science to explain it away, but I choose not to. I choose mystery. I choose meaning. I hope we all see the hand of God in the wonder of life around us. In wind and wave, in birds and branches, in shaded woods beneath high mountains. I hope we never fail to find the edges, the thin places, where God surprises us with a message: I am here.”

Time is short, gladden the hearts of those you love and seek out your *Thin Places*. Whether your passion is the out-of-doors, or not, find time to enjoy, to nurture, to heal and claim the gifts that nature provides. “Seek the joy of being alive.”

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